

Flowers for Magdalenes—Bohermore Cemetery, 4 March 2012

Good afternoon everyone and thank you for coming out to take part in today's "Flowers for Magdalenes" memorial celebration as part of International Women's Day which we celebrate this coming week. Out of respect for the sacred space of the graveyard, I am going to say just a few short words here outside the cemetery and would ask that we maintain respectful silence and prayer at the graveside. If she is comfortable doing so, I would like to ask Patricia Burke Brogan to recite her poem when we reach the grave

My name is Jim Smith, and I represent Justice for Magdalenes (JFM), the survivor advocacy group, that for the past three years has pursued a campaign to bring about justice for all women who spent time in Ireland's Magdalene Laundries and for the children born to some of those women. JFM has repeatedly called on the State to offer an apology and to provide Redress to survivors of this specific institutional abuse. Our group made an Inquiry application to the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) in 2010 and again to the United National Committee Against Torture (UNCAT) in 2011, and both these bodies published recommendations that the State provide Redress and facilitate Restorative Justice.

To date, the State has refused to do so. It has established an inter-

departmental committee, chaired by Senator Martin McAleese, to clarify State interaction with the Laundries and to create a narrative detailing such interaction. And the State continues to meet with representative survivors and groups like JFM, as well as with the religious orders. But this process takes time and time is the one commodity many survivors can't afford.

It is important to remember that no one in Ireland—not State, not Church, not the four Religious Congregations, not Families, and not society in general—has apologized to these women for the abuse they suffered.

Many Magdalene survivors are aging and are vulnerable. They deserve a Church and State apology without further delay. They need Redress and Reparation when they are still healthy enough to benefit from it.

This afternoon we gather to place flowers on the graves of women who died at the Sisters of Mercy Magdalen Asylum here in Galway. This institution was founded by a Miss Lynch in 1834, a laywoman who had recently returned from France to pursue Rescue Work. It was transferred into the control of The Sisters of Mercy in 1847. It continued to operate as a commercial laundry into the 1980s. We

know from Census Data that there were 65 women registered as living at the Galway asylum in 1901 and that this figure increased to 109 ten years later in 1911. We know from an 1956 interview given to Halliday Sutherland by the Galway Sisters of Mercy that there were 73 women in the Home at that time. But the records for Galway's Magdalen are lost, destroyed in a fire, and thus no one knows with certainty the numbers of women involved. Uncertainty is manifest too on the Bohermore headstone.

We remember today women who for too long were forgotten by Irish society, and in remembering them we afford a measure of dignity in death that **was** too often denied them in life. Some of the women who lie here in Bohermore died after a lifetime spent working without pay in laundries that were always commercial and for-profit enterprises.

These women entered the laundries by many routes and for many reasons—some were unmarried mothers or the victims of male sexual violence, some grew up in Industrial Schools, some came via the Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, others were brought by family members, local priests or nuns, or employers because they were perceived to pose a threat to familial, parish or communal respectability. Some were deemed too attractive and/or too simple

and were sent to the Magdalene for "preventative" reasons, because they might "fall away" and become pregnant outside of marriage. And, we must remember too that the Sisters of Mercy accepted these women when everyone else in Irish society turned away and abdicated responsibility for their fellow citizens—women who were their mothers, sisters, aunts, female first cousins, friends and neighbors. We as a society had these women in these institutions; we chose not to see them, we didn't ask questions, we helped maintain the open secret of their non-existence.

And, the uncertainty that surrounds these institutions given the lack of access to records enables Irish society to edit these women out from our national story. The Bohermore Magdalen Grave participates in this deliberate forgetting, this eclipsing of Irish women and their identities.

We do know that there are two graves associated with the Galway institution. The first one lies on the grounds of the Mercy's Foster Street Convent, a memorial to the 72 Consecrated Magdalens who lived and died there. These women's names and their dates of death were placed on 6 headstones in the early 1990s.

The second grave lies here at Bohermore, the grave for the

"ordinary" penitent class. When you approach it, you will note that even in 2012 there are no names on this grave. We do not know how many women are buried here. We do not know their names. We do not know when or how they died. We do not know how long they lived and worked in the Magdalen. We do not know where they came from and why they came to be at the Laundry. This grave challenges all of us to recognize the work yet to be done to bring a measure of human dignity to these women who lie anonymously in an unmarked grave.

Today's event is not, finally, about making a political statement. Rather, it is about affording dignity to a group of women who, in many cases, were denied that dignity in life, and in the case of these women at Bohermore, denied the dignity of a name on a headstone at their final resting place. Irish society abandoned these women in the past. We cannot deliberately forget them in the present. As a society, we can and must do right by these women.

In closing I ask Patricia Burke Brogan to read her poem "Make Visible the Tree" from her collection *Decollage*.

Make Visible the Tree

This is the Place of Betrayal.

Roll back the stones
behind madonna blue walls.
Make visible the tree.

Above percussion of engines
from gloom of catacombs,
through a glaze of prayer,
scumble of chanting,
make visible the tree,
its branches ragged
with washed-out linens
of a bleached shroud.

In this shattered landscape,
sharpened tongues
of sulphur-yellow bulldozers
slice through wombs
of blood-soaked generations.

This is the place
where Veronica,
forsaken,
stares and stares
at a blank towel.